

More Messy Moments by crystalkei

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Summary:

A non linear continuation of This Mess Of Moments. Organized by year.

Joyce and Hopper throughout the years.

1. Chapter 1

1989

“It’s already two, I can pop in for a few minutes but I’ve got to get home by three.”

“That’s when Holly gets off the bus?” Joyce asked Karen, absently, scrunching the top of the paper bag.

“Yeah, what do you even need me to come in for? We’ve been out for almost three hours, is there a surprise party in your living room or something? Forty three is not traditionally a surprise party year,” Karen joked, or Joyce thought she was joking, sometimes it was hard to tell with her.

“It’s Thursday afternoon. Your birthday is in two weeks, this is not a surprise party setup,” Joyce said, unlocking her front door and walking through it with a flourish to prove it.

Joyce and Karen had been off again, on again friends over the years. They’d gone to school together, they’d had kids at the same time. But for so long Joyce didn’t have time to socialize with friends, it was in the last few years that Joyce had time again. Plus after Will’s disappearance, Karen had stepped up. She’d helped Joyce, knowing that Will had to be looked after a little more. Since then especially, they’d become close again.

“What’s so important that you have to have me in your living room after we’ve already had lunch in Jonesboro?” Karen asked, annoyed.

Joyce looked at her. She pressed her lips together tightly and dumped out the bag from the drugstore on the coffee table.

“Holy shit,” Karen said, seeing the pregnancy tests she’d bought while

Karen was looking in the antique shop.

"I didn't want to tell you earlier and I'm terrified, I'm ten days late and I've never been late, even stressed to hell I've never been this late and we're so careful, Karen, I cannot emphasize enough how fucking careful we are, I.I...I can't be by myself while I do this."

"We drove to Jonesboro because you couldn't buy those here," Karen said, understanding exactly what their lunch had been about today.

"Think of the stores that sell them in town, I couldn't pick one up in Hawkins. Everyone would know." Joyce was rolling the paper bag into itself to keep her hands busy.

"You had at least seven Diet Cokes at lunch, go pee, let's get this over with," she said, but it wasn't because she was irritated, she was just as panicked as Joyce was now that she knew the situation.

Joyce nodded tightly and grabbed one of the boxes. She went in the bathroom and followed the instructions, then she put the little stick on top of the box and carried it back out to the living room. Karen was pacing the carpet in front of the coffee table. When she saw Joyce, she picked up the kitchen timer shaped like a hen that Jonathan had given Joyce for Christmas 15 years ago and she set it.

"Ten days?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Did anything happen? Did you get drunk or did he come home in the middle of the night and you didn't think about it?"

"Which one was Holly, I can't remember?" Joyce asked, sitting on the couch on her hands to keep them still.

"I got drunk. Remember, I swore not to drink for a year after I had her?"

Joyce snorted. "It didn't last. You were guzzling champagne-"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Karen gave her a look.

“Neither, Karen. I told you, we’re so careful.”

“The two of you can’t have a conversation like adults without getting into a fight that makes Vietnam look like a Captain Kangaroo episode, but this you talk about?” She raised her eyebrow, skeptical.

“We didn’t have to talk about it. It was easily established every time.”

“Condoms are only 98% effective,” Karen said.

“I’ve been on the pill since the doctor in Indianapolis put me on it after the thing,” Joyce said.

Karen knew what she was referring to. She had watched the boys so Joyce could drive up there to have the abortion after Lonnie had left for the last time. She couldn’t have another baby then and she certainly didn’t want to have one now, even if the circumstances were wildly different.

“Would you do it again?” Karen asked. “Would you even tell him?”

Joyce gulped. She felt her fingers wiggling under her thighs and shook her head. “I gotta...let’s just wait a second before I even...”

The timer dinged and Joyce closed her eyes before she spoke, “Read it, I can’t.”

She heard Karen fumble with the box before she sighed, it sounded relieved but Joyce couldn’t be sure of anything.

“Negative.”

Joyce opened her eyes, grabbed the next box, and ran for the bathroom.

“You haven’t had any other symptoms, have you?” Karen called through the bathroom door this time.

“None,” Joyce said, repeating the process again.

When Karen found out about Holly, they’d done this. Three tests. Though that time, it had been right after the kids went off to school.

Joyce couldn't wait. She hadn't been able to breathe for the last two days and Hopper noticed. She'd lied and said she was just tired. He knew she was lying but he didn't push.

Karen wasn't wrong, they didn't talk about things. That was rule number one so this was definitely not a conversation to have. Not now. Not until she was sure.

When the second test was negative, Joyce felt her chest relax just a little. By the time the timer dinged for the third test, Karen didn't even look at it before pointing at Joyce sharply and shouting, "Menopause!"

"What?" Joyce said, confused, but with one eye on that plastic stick on the coffee table.

She exhaled and the last bit of tension left her shoulders. Negative. Three negatives. She was out of the woods.

"Menopause!" Karen shouted again. "We're old, Joyce, the change doesn't happen overnight, Cindy Moore was just saying how she's getting hot flashes and she's only 45. Women have been known to start sooner. It's not unheard of!"

Joyce let out a relieved, stuttering laugh. "Menopause!" She closed her eyes and let her head hang back. "Thank God. I've never been so happy to be old."

"Uh...what the fuck?" Hopper had come in the front door while they had been shouting. "What's going on?"

Karen and Joyce shouted it again, both ecstatic. "Menopause!"

Hopper looked at the coffee table. "Are those-"

"Three negative pregnancy tests because I was ten days late? Yes, yes that's what you're looking at."

"We put food there, Joyce," he said, disgusted.

Joyce rolled her eyes and then clapped her hands together, smiling wide.

"Weird shit happens around here so I'm just gonna verify, there's no monsters or alternate dimensions happening at the moment, right?" Hopper asked.

Joyce took three steps and jumped, wrapping her legs around his waist. He almost didn't catch her, but she had her arms around his neck and kissed him quickly. (She did remember Karen was still there.)

"Menopause!" she repeated.

He looked utterly perplexed now. "You're too young for that."

"You're a smooth motherfucker, but I'm not and this is so much better than the other thing."

He snorted and put her down. "I forgot my notebook, I gotta go back to work."

"See you later," she said, Karen waved behind her, and then he was gone.

"Did he ever want to? Do you think he's sad about this?"

"No." Joyce was almost sure of it, like a solid 97% sure. "If he wanted to settle down and have more kids, he would have done that."

"Maybe he wanted one with you?"

"No." Joyce scoffed but Karen made a noise like she didn't agree.

"Like I said, you two never talk."

"You should try it sometime. It's great. We've been avoiding hard conversations for five years and I could do this for the rest of my life, I think." Joyce collected the boxes and tests and shoved them into the brown paper bag she'd brought them home in.

"When did he move in?" Karen said, finally sitting down on the couch.

“What do you mean?” Joyce asked, confused.

Karen swung her arm around like Vanna White. “He obviously lives here.”

“What?”

Sure, they didn’t really spend nights apart except the rare occasion he worked overnight, and she’d bought the damn Irish Spring in the bathroom because she was tired of him using her soap. But she’d never really called it living together. He hadn’t called it that. It just happened. Incrementally. Without any fanfare or discussion. Joyce wasn’t even sure that’s what it was. She’d never considered it that.

“The two of you are hopeless.” Karen shook her head.

“You know what?” Joyce started but Karen picked up a beer can that he’d left on the end table last night.

She held it up and swung it back and forth. “You don’t even like beer, on the off chance that you’re drinking, it’s not this.”

“He has Diet Coke at his trailer for me,” Joyce argued.

“I’d check the expiration date before I’d drink it if I were you.”

“Shut up.” Joyce took the can and put it in the paper bag with the tests and took it to the trash in the kitchen.

“He should sell the land the trailer sits on,” Karen said, when Joyce came back to the couch.

“Your real estate career needs that much help, huh?” Joyce teased, sitting down and putting her feet up on the coffee table.

“I’m doing quite well, thank you very much. But there’s a condo developer that wants to put a mini retreat on the lake and if Hop sold his land to them, it’d be a nice profit.”

“Don’t you have to go home to beat Holly there?”

“What are you going to do when the boys come home for

Thanksgiving, and then Christmas this year?" Karen asked, looking at her watch.

"He usually works."

"Do you honestly think they don't know? And now that his stuff is everywhere, are you really going to act like he doesn't live here?" Karen raised her eyebrows.

Joyce pouted. "I don't want to have that conversation. It's weird."

"This is what happens when you don't talk about anything for five years."

"It's working great. We're not repealing rule number one." Joyce was determined.

"I'm sure this has been a lovely couple of months since Will left for school but it's already the first week of November. You've got two weeks to figure this out." Karen stood up and grabbed her purse from the table. "Anyway, thank god for menopause, right?"

"Thank god," Joyce parroted back.

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He was half asleep when Joyce crawled into bed, her hair still damp from her shower. But he curled around her, pressing his face against her arm and lazily pressing kisses to her shoulder.

"Can I call you my old lady now?" he asked before she elbowed him in the chin.

"No, isn't that a thing crime lords or bikers call their wives?"

"You read too many paperbacks."

"Time to go back to that moment where you said I'm too young for

menopause. That was a better move,” she said, reaching to set her alarm.

It had been the weirdest thing to walk in on but he was glad he did. There was a time in the very beginning where he wondered if he should make certain things clear, like the way they’d covered the rules: No talking about important things that might set off fights, no telling people, and no telling the boys. The middle rule was now moot. People had guessed, though it had been years of whispers. They both still preferred to keep a low profile when together but there was always someone in the grocery store that would give a knowing smile, like the rumor finally met the truth.

But those rules had been as far as they’d gotten because rule number one meant that other things didn’t come up. He was happy to see today that his other issue wasn’t going to be something she’d ever cared about.

As if she could read his mind, she hesitantly started, “You...you never wanted to have another kid, right?”

He paused, not because he wasn’t sure, but because he sometimes felt like a jerk for admitting it. “You don’t replace one kid with another.”

“That’s what I thought, if you’d wanted that...it would have been different, you wouldn’t have this, with me,” she said, her eyes drifting.

“If I wanted to do that, I would have done that,” Hopper said, matter-of-factly, moving his hand under her tank top, his fingers brushing circles across her stomach. “Instead, I’m doing you.”

She laughed. “You’re ridiculous.”

Joyce turned on her side, facing away from him. She turned the lamp off and then scoot back so she was flush against him.

“Karen says you should sell your land to some condo developer,” she said, a yawn taking over the last syllables of the sentence.

He scoffed. “Where would I live if I sold it?”

Joyce started to laugh, it shook her whole body, quietly bubbling through her.

“What?” he asked, lifting up his head on his hand so he could look at her.

“Karen was right, we’re hopeless,” she muttered. “You live here, dummy.”

“No, I don’t.” He sputtered and scoffed, trying to figure out some response for that. Maybe he was here every night but, he didn’t...

“Your stuff in my closet three feet from this bed tells another story, Hop.”

She was now wide awake, smiling at him like he was an idiot, he was also wide awake but feeling very attacked.

“Okay, but what if we have one of our classic, knock down, drag out fights? Where am I gonna go?” he argued.

“The last two times that happened, you drove away in a huff for a couple hours and came back by midnight with cold feet and promises to make me breakfast in the morning.” Joyce turned and faced him, she gave him a patronizing look before patting his cheek. “You called Donald last week and told him I couldn’t work the overnight inventory because of official police business.”

“I don’t sleep well when you’re not here, that affects the safety of Hawkins,” he said, seriously.

She tried not to laugh at him, he could see her swallowing it the way her lips were pressed together, but her eyes were bright.

“When it’s time to sleep you magically appear in this bed, even when you work late. You were here when I got home from taking Will to school on move in day.”

“The dog was lonely and I figured you’d be all distressed and sad, I was being supportive.”

“When was the last time you were at your house?” Joyce asked.

“It was...” he trailed off, his face scrunched up while he tried to remember.

Okay, it might have been over a month. She took Will to school the end of August and then he’d gone home during the day a couple of times in early September and...okay so maybe he lived at her house all of the time now.

As if she knew he’d reached the conclusion, she leaned in and kissed him.

“It took me all afternoon so really, you’re quicker on the uptake than I am,” she said, rolling back over.

“Did we accidentally move in together?”

“Yes.” She took his hand and threaded her fingers with his, resting their hands on her stomach.

“I’ve heard that’s a tough conversation for people. The no talking rule is so effective we should write a self help book,” he said, putting his head back on the pillow.

“But I have to figure out what to tell the boys, they’ll be home for Thanksgiving soon.”

“I work holidays,” Hopper said.

“Your stuff is everywhere, should we just hide it all while they’re here?”

Hopper hummed, this seemed like it was coming a little too fast and he was tired, probably not a good time to make plans. “You ready to tell them?”

“God no, but your accidental move in means we have to think of something.”

“Trying to make this my fault like they aren’t your kids,” he teased. “I didn’t bring any kids to this party.”

“I’m impressed at the strides you’ve made in your personal grief

journey but that isn't funny."

"You sound like Dr. Chase," he added, rolling his eyes.

"I don't talk to you about things, I only speak to professionals about my problems," she said, putting her nose in the air, all snooty about the only therapist in town.

He laughed into her hair. "Jonathan knows."

"What?" Joyce's voice went up two octaves.

"Yeah, he's known for years. He caught me leaving once. Then he caught me coming in a couple of times. The good news is no one in the Byers family likes hard conversations."

"So what you're saying is we just don't say anything...but you live here."

"I'd bet you a dollar the boys say nothing."

He hoped he was right.

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Will came home first, on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. He walked through the door in the middle of the 10:00 news while Joyce was on the couch, crocheting. She'd been nervous about the boys finding out about Hopper for two days and she'd started some pot holders just to keep her hands busy. But when Will came through the door she jumped up and hugged him. He was so much taller than her but still scrawny, he hadn't quite grown into his frame yet.

"You're here early!" she said, pulling away and smiling wide.

"My roommates were all leaving today and it seemed silly to stay by myself when I could just drive home," he explained.

There were little things that Joyce assumed might be different about Will if he hadn't gone missing when he was 12 years old. For instance, he hated being alone. He also got cold easily and was skittish around loud noises, though he'd learned to control that little tick. But he survived okay and he was here which was the important thing.

"Are you hungry? We already ate but I can order you a pizza or something," she said, but he shook his head quickly.

"I ate on the way here." Will looked around as if someone was missing. "Is everything okay, Mom?"

"Yeah, of course," she answered, slightly confused.

Then she caught Will looking out towards the front of the house. He had to be talking about Hopper. His Bronco was out front and Will couldn't have missed it, she glanced through the window and saw he'd parked right next to it.

He nodded and moved to put his bag in his room. "I think I'm going to shower and go to bed."

"Are you still set to go with me to pick up Jonathan at the airport tomorrow?" she asked. "If you're too tired that's okay."

"I'm fine, Mom, of course I'll go with you. We can take my car."

Instead of buying herself a new car last year, she'd decided he needed one. He borrowed hers and rode around with his friends, so he'd never had one, but since he was going away to school in Bloomington, she wanted him to have something newer, something reliable so he could be safe.

"Great, I have to work in the morning," she said. "I'll be home around two. You'll be okay by yourself here, right?"

At some point in her life, she might not hear the little panicky voice that said he shouldn't be left alone, but today wasn't the day.

"I'll be fine." Will looked around again, like he was waiting for something. "I'll probably sleep late. Classes and working have been

non stop so I'm looking forward to sleeping in.”

The backdoor opened and the dog came barreling in. He jumped up on Will and Will bent down quickly, petting the dog and talking to him.

Hopper pulled the door shut behind him and stopped when he saw that Will was home early. He gave Joyce a look, he was caught off guard, but she shrugged. She wasn't sure what she could do to put him at ease and she didn't know what was going to happen.

It had been his plan to just not say anything. No talking, a new plan for the whole family.

“I wondered where you were,” she heard Will telling the dog, who was trying to lick Will's face. “Stop, stop.”

Joyce rolled her eyes. She'd never even wanted the damn dog, it was a whim, the boys swore they'd take care of him, instead Joyce ended up doing all the work and the dog didn't even like her. Always shitting in her rose bushes and tracking mud in the house. Hopper though, he was attached. Since he'd first met the damn dog, all those years ago, when Will was missing. He looked almost jealous at the way the dog was mauling Will affectionately.

“Come on, you can sleep in my room tonight,” Will told the dog, finally standing up.

Hopper hung back, almost to the point where Will might have missed him, he was in the kitchen and she caught him turning to the fridge. He grabbed the container on top with the dog treats and the dog quickly abandoned Will to wait at Hopper's feet, tail wagging.

If she hadn't been so concerned about how Will would react to Hopper, she might have rolled her eyes at Hopper being a dick about the dog with the dog treat maneuver.

But Joyce was busy watching Will, his face was stoic, he didn't look shocked or uncomfortable, he just kind of stood there for a second, staring.

“I'm gonna shower,” he said, finally. “Good night.”

“Night, sweetie,” Joyce said.

She was surprised to hear Hopper call out, “Night,” when she did.

Will walked away and Joyce reached for Hopper’s hand. He took it and she led him back to the couch.

“Happy he’s home?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She sat back in her spot, gathering up her crochet supplies for the night.

“Did he say anything before I came in?”

Joyce shook her head.

“Well he’s gonna know for sure from the bathroom.”

“I think your show with the dog sold it just fine,” Joyce said, giving him a sidelong glance.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he lied.

They watched the news and when the weather man wrapped up, Hopper squeezed Joyce’s knee.

“I’m gonna get ready for bed.”

“Yeah-” Joyce started, but Will came into the room.

“Mom?”

Hopper stood up, moving behind Will to head to the bedroom. Joyce caught Will giving him a look but she wasn’t sure what it meant. Hopper, for his part didn’t look at Will at all. Coward. All big about his plan and then bolting out of the room. But Joyce was more entertained by it than annoyed.

“What’s up, sweetie?” She pat the spot on the couch that Hopper had just vacated but Will hesitated.

“Do you have any Oatmeal Pies?”

Joyce laughed at his expectant face. This kid was in college. He was registered for the selective service and everything and he was asking her for his favorite snack like when he was a kindergartner again.

“They’re in the cupboard where the cookie sheets are. In the back.”

His face lit up. “You’re telling me where you hide them?” He didn’t wait for her answer though, he bolted to the kitchen to get the box.

“I shouldn’t have to hide something from a grown man,” she called after him.

It felt funny calling him that, he’d always be her baby, but he was. He was a grown man. Maybe all this stuff about Hopper and her was just something he deserved to know. As an adult.

Will came back to the couch with three oatmeal pies, but he gave her one, and she smiled.

“One for me? Thank you.”

“Ladies first,” he said.

But instead of breaking into the plastic and eating them too quickly, like he’d always done, he was slow. He took a bite and chewed it.

“I was worried about you,” Will admitted, after he’d swallowed his bite.

“Why, sweetie?” she asked, concerned.

He paused, and Joyce tried to give him the time to answer. She opened her cookie and picked a small piece off and ate it.

“I know you’ve worked hard to support us and raise us and it’s been you and me for the last few years, and I know you have Mike’s mom, but I...I was worried you’d be lonely.”

Joyce bit her lip. It had never occurred to her that he’d be worried about her being alone. She felt a twinge of guilt for not letting Will know that this thing with Hopper didn’t just spring up. They’d been together for years and Will had no idea. Then again, he was pointedly

avoiding mentioning Hopper so maybe he knew and just didn't want to say anything.

"I'm not lonely, Will."

He smiled, soft and relieved. "I'm glad. I'm really happy that you're not lonely."

"You don't have to worry," Joyce added, she hated that he worried about her.

"I won't."

They sat comfortably, watching Johnny Carson's monologue while they finished their cookies.

When Joyce climbed into bed, she poked at Hopper. He was on his stomach, already snoring, so she poked him a little harder. He grumbled and rolled on his side to face her. He didn't even open his eyes.

"What?"

"This was a good idea. The no talking thing and the not hiding your shit. I think Will is taking it really well."

He sighed and finally opened his eyes. His face was all smooshed and grumpy but she felt herself smiling wide and she saw him loosen up in response. Hopper gave her half a smile and grabbed her hip, pulling her closer to him. She squeaked, and his chest rumbled with a low laugh before he kissed her. His tongue slid along the seam of her lips and his hand on her hip started tugging at her panties.

"What are you doing?" She kissed him again but put her hand over his to stop him. "Will's here, we can't..."

"We've been having sex in this house while Will is here for the last five years," he reminded her, kissing along her neck. "You do remember how to be quiet, right? Three months of not worrying about it and now you're spoiled?"

"Shut up," she pushed on his chest, rolling away to set her alarm and

turn the lamp out.

When she rolled back over he was smiling at her.

“I know I’m so very good at this that you’re worried you can’t keep quiet but-”

“Oh stop,” she said, kissing the side of his mouth. “You’re going down on me.”

“You act like that’s a deal breaker.” He scoffed, throwing back the covers, and moving down. He nipped at the inside of her thigh. “Gladly.”

Hopper had to remind her to be quiet, but she was pretty sure that Will didn’t hear them. But if he did, well, he knew now so, if he was old enough to know where the Oatmeal Pie hiding place was, he was old enough to know that his mother was the absolute opposite of lonely.

Every holiday, Hopper volunteered to work. It’d been so long now that the other officers just knew, there’d be two of them working with him, and everyone else got the day off. Even when wild and mysterious things happened in Hawkins, it’s not like having more cops out working was going to fix anything. So Hopper was the guy. Chief worked holidays.

And he never minded. He’d done it on purpose. There was no reason for him to not work, holidays reminded him too keenly of Sarah or even Diane. All these years later it still stung to remember the few years he had with them. Working was a good way to keep his mind occupied.

He’d never really had an option to be with Joyce on holidays, in the very beginning he’d been put off by it, back when he was still fighting for a place with her. Waiting for her to accept that he was

going to be around if she'd let him. In retrospect, all those years were important. They both needed that time to learn how to not take petty shots and lash out at each other when the smallest something came at them.

But now it felt like they were going to ease into this. Will had taken the new information well. Jonathan might be more resistant or he might just expect it. He had known since the beginning anyway, surely this wouldn't be a shock.

Maybe next year he wouldn't work holidays.

He came in the backdoor, it was wet out and he didn't want to track mud through the house, so he toed off his boots at the back porch and went in. Joyce was doing the dishes at the sink.

"Is it still raining?" she asked, when he came to lean against the counter next to her.

"Little bit, that's why I came in the back. Didn't make the drive to the airport bad, did it?"

"No, we were fine. We stopped on the way home and ate, I brought you something though, it's in the fridge." She tilted her head towards the fridge.

He tried not to laugh imagining her ordering a whole other meal for him and the boys trying not to say anything.

"Thanks, I'll get it in a minute."

"What'd you bring home?" she said, asking after the bag he was carrying.

Hopper put it on the counter and pulled out three pies, each piled on top of each other in their foil pie plates and plastic lids.

"Pie?" Joyce squinted, perplexed, while she dried her hands on a kitchen towel.

"Remember Flo retired last year," he started and Joyce nodded. "She's set a personal goal to win the blue ribbon at the county fair for

the best pie. So she's got until summer to perfect her pies. She brought at least 30 of them to the station. She personally handed me these three."

"Are they the best ones or the poisoned ones?" Joyce asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Probably the best ones but we'll have the kids eat if first, just in case."

"I'll call Karen and tell her she can make three less pies than she was planning."

Karen, knowing how awkward things were going to be, had invited Joyce and the boys to Thanksgiving.

"You won't have to try to cook, the boys can catch up here with Mike and Nancy. You can watch me get drunk, it'll be fun. When Hopper gets off he can come over and have leftovers. Then it won't just be you sitting around trying not to talk about the bearish man elephant in the room."

"I also got this," he said, pulling out two bottles of wine from the bag.

Joyce snorted.

"Don't let her get really drunk before I get there. I wanna watch her get hammered, too. And then I wanna watch Ted try to figure out what to do with her."

"You're terrible," Joyce said, but she was laughing.

She leaned into him and Hopper pulled her closer.

Until someone started to have a coughing fit in the living room. He hadn't even considered that anyone was watching them but they had a loud audience now. Hopper looked over Joyce's head and saw Jonathan glaring at him, no longer coughing. Will was fiddling around on the unclaimed Gameboy Hopper had taken from the evidence locker last month, pointedly avoiding the scene.

Joyce frowned.

“I’m gonna go shower,” he said, and she nodded at him.

“You want me to heat up the food for you?”

“Nah, I’ll do it.”

“Alright,” Joyce said, moving over to make room in the fridge for the pies.

The rain stopped so after his shower, Hopper took the dog out back and had a cigarette on the porch. Jonathan came out, calling for the dog, but immediately froze when he saw Hopper.

Jonathan pulled a pack of cigarettes from his own pocket.

“Hey, knucklehead,” Hopper called after him as he was walking back into the house, lighting a cigarette. “Stay out here if you’re gonna smoke.”

Jonathan turned and glared at him. “It’s my house.”

“It’s your mom’s house,” he said. “And she quit smoking in April so we’re gonna smoke outside.”

“She makes you smoke outside?”

“No, I’m not an asshole, and to be considerate I smoke outside.”

Jonathan scoffed. “It’s been a few years, but I told you before, I don’t need a dad.”

“And I’ve told you that’s never been on the agenda. I don’t wanna be anybody’s dad. I’m just suggesting you not be an asshole and you smoke outside.”

He could see Jonathan battling internally.

“You not being an asshole is a debatable point,” he said, leaning against the house.

“Lot of people would agree with you.” Hopper flicked the ashes of his cigarette.

“Will thinks this is okay.” The implication was that Jonathan did not.

“I expect Will has a different opinion of me than you do, though I’m not exactly sure why.”

“He doesn’t remember you running all over town,” Jonathan explained. “Sleeping with anything that moved, shit, I remember my calculus teacher letting us watch a movie one day after she’d had a bad night with you.”

Hopper tilted his head, trying to think of who he was talking about.

“Ms. Toleman,” Jonathan said.

Hopper snapped. “Ginger.”

“And you wonder why I don’t like you.”

“You liked me fine before I was sleeping with your mom,” Hopper came back.

Jonathan flicked his cigarette into the wet grass. Hopper rolled his eyes. Dramatic little shit, Hopper was the one who kept the lawn up and he certainly didn’t litter it with butts, he almost walked down to retrieve it and put it in the ashtray, but he held back.

“Good news, you live in New York and your mother makes her own choices,” Hopper said, taking one last drag. “You ever tried to tell her what to do? Doesn’t go well.”

Hopper pressed the butt into the ashtray on the railing.

“Why all the secrecy? ‘Coulda just married her years ago.’”

Hopper laughed at that. “That sounds a little like you’re mad at me for not stepping in and being your dad, so you can see why I’m

laughing.”

Jonathan narrowed his eyes and folded his arms across his chest.

“I didn’t say that.”

“And we’re not getting married.” Hopper felt confident making a definitive statement like that. “I don’t have to explain or defend myself but I will this one time. If you’re worried that means there’s the chance that I’ll run out and start sticking my dick everywhere like I used to, I’ll tell you that I haven’t slept around since New Year’s Eve of ‘83. Hell, since we found your brother.”

Joyce had never once asked him about the other women. She knew exactly what he’d done and anytime it came up before they were together, she’d tell him she didn’t want to know. After they were together, she’d not said a damn thing. Ever. It was irritating to have to defend himself to her son over it.

Jonathan stared him down for a minute but Hopper was unfazed. He whistled for the dog and when the dog came, he opened the door and went in the house, leaving Jonathan to sulk on the stairs like the starving New York City artist he was striving to be.

The rain from the night before was trying to turn to snow. It was cold and wet and Hopper was definitely not working next Thanksgiving. The family spats and backyard football games that ended up as fist fights exhausted him. It was only six when he rolled into park behind Will’s car in front of the Wheeler’s house but it felt later.

Ted answered the door and Joyce was around the corner behind him, coming to meet him at the door.

“Hop,” she exclaimed, a bright smile on her face. “Karen is going to do her beauty pageant thing.”

Hopper immediately smiled as wide as Joyce. He stripped his coat off quick and followed her to the family room where Karen, as promised, was wearing her old beauty pageant sash and a glittery tiara. Jonathan and Nancy looked bored on the couch, but Will, Mike, and Holly all stood around as excited as Joyce.

It was a rare drunk Karen event. Ted came in the room with the hula hoops.

“Alright, don’t hurt yourself, I don’t want to drive you to the hospital,” Ted said, handing her the hula hoops.

Joyce started to giggle and Hop put his hand over her mouth. He leaned in and whispered, “If you laugh too much then she’ll laugh and she’ll never be able to do it.”

“I know,” she said, swatting him away. “I’m trying.”

She stepped back so her back was flush with his chest and he put his hand on her hip. He saw Jonathan and Nancy make a face, if he wasn’t trying to keep quiet, he might have said something, but if Karen started laughing, they’d never get to see her trick.

Karen stepped into the first hula hoop, she pulled it up and started to move her hips, keeping the hoop bouncing as she went. Holly excitedly held up a smaller hoop and Karen took it and put it on her left arm, she started to rotate her arm so the hoop stayed going around. She repeated this action with her right arm.

“Gimme the last one, you’re not tall enough, Holly,” Mike whispered to his little sister.

“I can do it!”

“You’re not tall enough,” Nancy said from her spot on the couch. “Just give it to Mike.”

The eight year old groaned but gave in and Mike carefully approached his mother and waited for the signal.

“Okay,” Karen said, her face intense and concentrated.

Mike carefully put the hoop around Karen's neck as Karen started to move her neck around to keep the fourth hula hoop moving. Everyone clapped.

"Give me the wine glass," Karen demanded, her concentration slipping.

"Karen, you're just going to get red wine all over the carpet," Joyce said, trying to keep her laughter under control.

"You're going to make me laugh, that's the real problem," Karen snapped back before Ted threw his head back.

Ted's raucous laugh shook the room and that set everyone off. The kids couldn't take it, they started too, and Karen's face got red before she cracked up. All the hoops fell and so did Karen. She tripped over the hoop that had been around her waist and stayed on the floor giggling for a solid three minutes.

"Glad I didn't miss that," Hopper whispered to Joyce.

"Right? I tried to hold her off. She's been singing Broadway musicals for the last half hour because I knew you'd want to see the hula hoops."

"Thanks for stalling."

"Hopper," Karen said, finally recovering from her fit on the floor. "There's food in the kitchen. There's a whole plate set aside but you can just get in the Tupperware in the fridge if you want, too."

"You go get your food, I'm gonna help Karen clean up," Joyce said, reaching to pull Karen up.

He found the plate and the food easily and popped it in the microwave, he was about to head into the family room and sit down with Ted to see what football game was still going, but he heard Jonathan and Nancy around the corner.

"My mom said they had a pregnancy scare last month," Nancy said, disgusted.

“Don’t tell me that!” Jonathan sounded just as horrified.

“Yeah, I don’t think he’s going anywhere, Mom said they’re a couple now. It’s weird, but c’mon, you knew that was gonna happen.”

“I thought he’d get bored and find someone else to fuck, not my *mom*, Nancy.”

Hopper couldn’t help but listen. He vaguely remembered that Jonathan and Nancy had reconnected in New York last year and dated but according to Joyce that it didn’t last long. It was fun listening to them gossip about he and Joyce.

“Well, now he’s living in your house. Have fun with that,” Nancy said and Hopper could hear Jonathan hiss.

“Jesus.”

“At least you don’t live there anymore. And besides, it looks like he’s really nice to your mom. They’re cute. Cute old people.”

Hopper bristled. They weren’t old. That old. Not old enough to be deemed old people.

“I wonder if my dad knows.” Jonathan paused. “I’ll ask Will. He’ll know if my dad knows.”

“What does it matter?” Nancy asked.

“It doesn’t really, it’s just weird, Nancy.”

“I used to think my parents hated each other, remember?” Nancy lowered her voice and Hopper had to take another step closer to hear. “But they didn’t. I was just being a bratty teenager. Maybe you’re just being a bratty adult.”

Jonathan scoffed. “Whatever.”

“I’m just saying, it’s probably good for your mom. Chief listened to her when no one else would, you remember, you liked him then.”

“That was different.”

“Get over it, Jonathan. Don’t be a prick when your mom is obviously happy.”

Joyce came up behind Hopper and startled him. He almost dropped the plate of food. He put his finger over his lips and gestured to the wall where just around the corner Nancy and Jonathan had been talking.

“Why do you have to bring that up? Of course I want my mom to be happy,” Jonathan almost whined.

“Then suck it up and get over your thing about the Chief. You know it’s been happening for years so accept it. Let your mom be happy,” Nancy said. “If you still wanna slip upstairs then you gotta shut up about your mom and Hopper. I’m not gonna let you ruin sex because you’re thinking about your mom. That’s gross.”

Joyce covered her mouth quickly and Hopper tried not to laugh. He pressed his lips together tightly.

“Fine, I’ll stop talking about it. But I want the record to show that I still think he’s an asshole.”

“No one would ever mistake you for liking him.” Nancy’s voice was floating down the hall now and Hopper peaked around the corner to check that they’d gone.

“I thought they broke up,” Hopper said, finally letting out a laugh.

Joyce shook her head. “What was that? I don’t want to know that! I have to tell Karen.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Hopper said, stopping her from running off by hooking his finger into her belt loops. “Tell her later. I can just imagine her drunk as she is going up there and making a scene.”

“That’s the best part, the scene, remember? Drunk Karen is fun Karen.” Joyce gave him a look.

“He hates me. That’s what he was telling Nancy. He hates me and he thinks I’m gonna fuck other people and then leave you high and dry,” Hopper told Joyce.

He wasn't upset about it, he didn't care if Jonathan ever liked him, but he thought Joyce would want to know. And in the back of his mind, he finally realized, he was worried that Jonathan's opinion of him would cause Joyce to walk away from Hopper. He'd known for years that Jonathan and Will were the most important thing to Joyce. He'd never fault her for it. On occasion over the years, he'd gotten annoyed or upset over it, but he understood it, he just didn't want to be tossed out of the very comfortable routine they'd created since the boys were gone.

Joyce reached for his cheek, her thumb ran along the line of his jaw and Hopper had to work to keep his eyes open. He loved the way she touched him and he instantly felt silly for worrying.

"He'll get over it," she said, standing up on her tiptoes to kiss him quickly.

Since they didn't talk, he knew to take this little moment as the big thing. She didn't care what Jonathan thought so he was safe. Joyce was committed.

"There's a football game still on and I think Karen wants to hear dick jokes."

"Buried the lead there, who cares about the football if you're telling dick jokes," Hopper said, grabbing his plate and following Joyce.

Jonathan and Nancy clearly knew the meaning of quickie, and when they made it back downstairs, coming down separately and acting casual, Joyce almost lost it. But she buried her face in Hopper's arm and managed to keep it together.

On the way home, Joyce drove with him in the Bronco and the boys went home in Will's car.

"Ask Karen about selling the land, will ya?"

Hopper didn't look at her in the passenger seat. He kept his eyes on the road, it was finally snowing and he wanted to drive cautiously. But he was nervous about how she'd react to the request, too.

"Are you sure?"

"If you're okay with me at your house," he added, tentatively.

Joyce took his hand and threaded her fingers with his. "Yeah." She lifted their hands and kissed his.

For two people who never talked about things, this relatively simple gesture was vast and meaningful.

"We can pay off your house," he offered.

"My house? It's paid off," she said, nonchalant.

"What? When?"

Joyce had been overworked since the day he moved back to Hawkins and he knew it'd been longer than that. She didn't say, but he'd heard around town that Lonnie had left her with a staggering amount of debt when they divorced, and it's not like her job at the store was glamorous. And supporting her boys without any help from that jackass (and not just supporting them, her boys had good shit) was a feat. She went without a lot so they could have the best. He was flabbergasted.

She hummed, thinking. "Last year. Didn't you notice I stopped working doubles?"

Hopper was embarrassed that he hadn't noticed, but last year was different from this year. He was still sneaking in and out of her house in the middle of the night last year.

"So what should we do with the money?"

"I don't know, it's your land, your money." She was sincere, not annoyed.

Joyce and money were two things he'd learned not to mix very early on. She was too proud and hated accepting help. But it felt selfish for him to move into her house and then keep all that money and he really wanted to share it with her.

"Oh come on, let's do something fun," he suggested. "You ever been on a vacation? I went to Disneyland once and I've been to

Yellowstone but let's go on a real vacation, somewhere warm."

She worried her lip between her teeth and he wished they were home already so he could kiss her.

"Let's go to Hawaii," she threw out, almost unsure, like he might not agree.

Hopper felt a slow, wide smile spread across his face. "That sounds perfect."

"In February. I can't take another frigid February."

"I'd say call Karen when we get home but you know Ted's already put her in bed."

Joyce laughed. "I'll talk to her."

"I don't think I'm gonna work Thanksgiving next year."

Joyce looked over at him, surprised. "No?"

"Is that alright?"

"Depends, have you ever cooked a turkey?" she asked, with a sly grin.

"Never."

"Guess we'll have to order in." But she smiled like she knew it was big deal. "What about Christmas?"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down." He put his hand up, steering with his knees for a second. "That's a big family event, I need to work Christmas one more year."

Joyce shook her head and laughed. "Coward."

"We survived Thanksgiving, that's the limit at the moment." He pulled into the spot in front of the house and turned the car off.

"Considering everything, I think we did really well." She leaned over

and kissed him, her hand scratching along the back of his neck.

He groaned when she pulled away to gather her stuff.

“Maybe we should write that self help book,” she added.

The title could be *How To Build an Entire Relationship Without Talking*. Hopper was feeling confident that it would be a best seller.

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2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce gets hit on by the economics teacher and Hopper finds out that words mean something.

Prompted from the ways to say "i love you" meme on tumblr with "I was just thinking about you."

1988

Hopper opened the door to his office and was immediately struck with a sense of déjà vu.

"Are you okay? Is everybody okay?" he asked Joyce, trying to sound calm.

"Hm?" She turned and he saw she was calm, fine, safe. "Oh, yeah, I'm okay."

"I just left your house about," he paused to look at his watch as he came to sit at his desk in front of her. "Three hours ago. Why're you here?"

"What'd'you when you leave my house, anyway?"

(She never let him stay over. Well, not all the way. He had to be gone before the boys, or these days, Will, since he was the one still at home, he had to be gone before Will woke up. The boys weren't supposed to know about...this long standing thing they had.)

"Uh, well I go home, shower, make coffee. Flo doesn't know it but she should thank you. I haven't been late to work in four years."

"You're the boss, you're allowed to be late, aren't you?" Joyce asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Could you let Flo know that on your way out?" He clicked his tongue and pointed to the door with his thumb.

Joyce gave him a half smile and nodded. “I’ll tell her.”

“If no one is missing or dead or stealing shit off your porch-”

“Like anyone would steal shit off my porch, not with your Bronco parked there most nights.” Joyce gave him a look.

“What’re you doing here?” he asked.

“I was just thinking about you.”

It was plain and clear but he knew there was something more to it. He narrowed his eyes at her and she gave a one shouldered shrug.

“I had to do this parent teacher thing this morning so I don’t have to be at work for another half hour, I had time to kill so I thought I’d come say hi.”

“Parent teacher thing?” Hopper asked, shuffling some papers around on his desk, thinking if he looked busy she’d be fess up to why she was really here.

“Yeah, there was this long meeting for parents the other night about the new college application process,” Joyce explained. “I couldn’t go because I was working but Will’s economics teacher called me and said it was really important that I know the information so he set up this conference this morning.”

Hopper perked up at that.

“His economics teacher?”

“Yeah,” she replied, her brow furrowing.

“Mr. Fletcher.”

“He’s hoity toity and prefers to be called Dr. Fletcher. I guess when you go to school that long and you end up teaching high school, you want people to *know* you went to school that long.”

“I know the guy,” Hopper said. “I gave him a moving violation the other day for rolling a stop sign in his little Japanese convertible.”

“Sounds like you have an opinion on him.”

Hopper laughed. “He’s a prick.”

“He was fine,” Joyce defended, but definitely just because he was being contrary and she fought him when he was being contrary.

“Was any of the information about the college applications particularly important? Anything you didn’t know already from helping Jonathan?”

Joyce took a second to think. “No, I knew all of it already.”

“Why’d you come over this morning, Joyce?” he asked, a smile pulling across his face.

“I was thinking about you, I’m killing time before I have to go to work. It’s silly to drive all the way home.”

“The hot shot high school economics teacher with a PhD was hitting on you, honey.”

Joyce’s jaw dropped. “What? No, he wasn’t.”

Hopper scoffed, it was endearing how oblivious she was at this moment.

“What’d you say when he asked you out?”

“He didn’t ask me out,” she countered.

Hopper dropped his chin and held eye contact.

“He asked about helping Will with the forms... If I didn’t have time because of work.”

“And?” Hopper prodded and Joyce sucked in air.

“He suggested we could all have dinner at his house.”

“Bingo,” he said with a snap of his fingers.

“This has been a really weird morning so please don’t,” she hesitated.

“I dunno, do whatever you’re gonna do.”

“I’m not gonna do anything.”

Now it was her turn to stare him down.

“Okay, I might gloat a little.”

“It didn’t occur to me that he was asking me out, but I thought it was weird.”

“What’d you tell him?” Hopper asked. “About the family dinner he’s planning to seduce you with?”

“Well, I don’t usually turn down home cooked meals,” she teased.

“Liar, you turn down free food more than a person should. You’re too proud for it.”

Joyce rolled her eyes. He knew her too well and she hated it.

“I told him I was seeing somebody.”

Now it was Hopper’s turn to go slack jawed.

“You...you what?”

They didn’t tell people. People talked but nobody knew for sure. It was half the reason why he was surprised to see her in his office. And he would have happily told anyone who asked but she didn’t want to and he saw the value in that.

“You didn’t know he was hitting on you but you turned down his dinner invitation with ‘I have a boyfriend?’”

“We’re not 17 anymore. I told him I was *seeing someone*. That’s how you get weird men off your case. An age old, tried and true trick, unfortunately, since men’s egos are so fragile.”

“Sure.”

“Yes.”

“And then you drove over here, right through the middle of town, walked in the front door of the station during business hours, your car parked visibly out front-”

“Get to the point, Hop,” Joyce said.

“You weren’t thinking about me, you were letting the goddamn world know you were coming right to me.”

“You’re an arrogant son of a bitch, has anyone ever told you that?”

“Pretty sure you told me that yesterday,” he said just to watch her smile.

“This wasn’t some sly plan to alert a skeezy teacher that I was taken.” She stood up and walked around to lean against the desk next to him. He reached behind him without looking and twisted the blinds closed. “I told him I was seeing someone.”

“Is this some kind of grand gesture?” he asked, turning his chair so he was angled better to face her. “I’ve told plenty of women I can’t go out with them because I’ve got my hands full already.”

Joyce laughed. “Your hands full? You love to bring up all those women and you hate that I’ve never once been threatened by any of them, but tell me you don’t really say you’ve got your hands full.”

“They get the point,” he said, waggling his eyebrows. “And you not being jealous is part of your appeal.”

“You like me because I’m generally unaffected by your charms and you like a challenge. But you know I don’t have time to be concerned about your sex life.”

“You’re pretty into my sex life when I’ve got my head between your thighs.” He drove home the point by moving his hand up her inner thigh, fanning out his fingers and his thumb stopping just short of her center.

Damn, he wished she wore skirts.

But she moved his hand, lacing her fingers with his, then bent down

and kissed him tenderly. It wasn't about fire and heat, it was comfortable and grounding.

"I was just thinking about you," she repeated, soft and sure, and he finally recognized that it wasn't offhanded.

It was important.

When faced with another person coming onto her, she was thinking about him. In any normal, supportive and loving relationship that would be obvious, but even after years, the two of them would never consider their relationship normal and the word "love" had never been bandied about. They'd been too hurt by past experiences. Joyce's goals were her kids first, everything else second, including him. He was desperate and needy, but never vulnerable enough with her to admit that he loved her.

But this meant something and he didn't really know how to reciprocate.

She leaned her forehead on his and he closed his eyes, reveling in the touch.

"I have to go to work," she whispered.

When he opened his eyes, he frowned.

"I can't believe we spent this time breaking rule number one, we could have been having sex in this very chair."

"That's what you get for wanting to talk," she said, giving him a small laugh.

"Thanks," Hopper said. It seemed silly but he wanted her to know that he understood the weight of it. "Thanks for thinking about me."

Joyce pulled back, kissing his forehead and then standing up. She didn't say anything, like she was scared to ruin this somehow. That's what they were good at, ruining perfectly good things with fights and sharp words.

"Why would he even ask me out? Do I look like I'm available? I don't

have time to date. That's why I've got you. You're easy."

He laughed. "I am."

"I only meant easy like that halfway. The other half I meant, I already know you, getting to know someone new would take up so much time. But this is easy because we already know each other so well."

"Is that a joke? It's easy?" They had strict rules about their relationship and had to fight for every inch of ground they gained over the years. It was incredibly hard work, pushing against both of their temperaments to keep this going.

"Well." She gave him a weak smile. "I mean easier than getting to know someone new."

"Maybe he's your soulmate, maybe it would be easy for you and him, maybe you'd agree on everything and never fight?"

It was Joyce's turn to laugh. "Eh, I'll take the devil I know."

Hopper snorted. "A minute ago we were having a moment, now you ruined it."

"That's what we do, you think someone else could keep up with me?"

He shook his head, grinning at her fondly.

"Will's spending the night at Lucas' tonight. Pick up a pizza and come over after work?"

Hopper nodded and then she was gone.

His day was looking up, plus he could spend it thinking up subtle ways to pester that economics teacher. That'd be fun.

Notes for the Chapter:

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Author's Note:

You're welcome to submit requests for Moments at
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